

# PULLING THE GOALIE



COURTESY HIAG AVSHARIAN

BY JORDAN SCENNA

HIAG AVSHARIAN MAKES AN INFERTILITY COMEDY

When Hiag Avsharian closed the door to his room at an Ann Arbor fertility clinic, making a movie was the last thing on his mind. He was trying to start a family with his wife Ema, but things weren't going well.

"At first, the decision to have a kid is exciting. You don't think it's going to take long at all. It's easy. It can happen just like that," Avsharian says, snapping his fingers.

But after a few months of trying and no pregnancy, the couple grew worried. They consulted a fertility specialist who said that if they couldn't conceive naturally after a year, they might need help.

IUI, or intrauterine insemination, is a type of artificial insemination where sperm is washed and concentrated to separate the healthy swimmers from the weaker dog paddlers, then placed directly into the uterus.

This is how Avsharian found himself standing inside a tiny room surrounded by the kind of magazines usually kept on back shelves sheathed in dark plastic.

As he tried to do his part, calamity ensued.

"You have this little sample cup that you have to hold, and you gotta get it in there right, that's kind of important," he says. "You can't scrape it off the floor.

Well, I lost the handle on the cup, right at the wrong moment. The cup fell on the floor, and I was down there after it."

Avsharian thought this was hilarious.

"I came out of the room, and I go to give the sample to the nurse, and she asks me if there was any spillage. I started to tell her, but then corrected myself. 'Ah, um, no, no spillage.'"

It was moments like these, amid a brutal emotional journey, that made Avsharian think this would make a great movie.

"MY GOAL IS ONE MILLION VIEWS," HE SAYS—A FIGURE HE BELIEVES WOULD "PROMOTE THE CONVERSATION TO MAKE INFERTILITY TREATMENTS MORE ACCESSIBLE, WHICH MEANS MORE MANDATED HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE."

Avsharian's short comedy *Pulling the Goalie* comes out this month, but it's more than a decade in the making: he began writing the script shortly after his daughter Megan's birth in 2009. "I had these detailed scenes playing out in my head, and I thought they were just so funny," he says.

When her husband told her he wanted to turn their personal struggle into a movie, Ema Avsharian freaked. "At first, I didn't

think he was serious!" she recalls. "The idea came up early after we had Megan, so the entire topic was very sensitive."

Today, with some distance from one of the "hardest periods of my life," Ema says she's proud of her husband for bringing awareness to a subject most people don't want to talk about.

*Pulling the Goalie* is the story of a young couple grappling with infertility, set in the rough-and-tumble world of beer league hockey, a world Avsharian has been a part of for years. An Ann Arbor townie, he spent his teenage years playing pickup hockey on Dolph Pond, and began playing in the local rec leagues at the Ann Arbor Ice Cube in his twenties. Now in his early fifties, he still laces up every year.

Avsharian hopes the film's humor will cut through the stigma that surrounds infertility.

"The whole process takes such an emotional toll," he says. "You feel like you don't deserve to have kids. It's the one thing your body is supposed to do, and you can't do it. Your sense of self-worth goes right down."

Avsharian looks more like a shortstop than a hockey player. He's lean, with a compact frame, salt and pepper hair and glasses (when he needs them). You wouldn't expect he was a budding filmmaker either. His experience lies in business.

Avsharian is a former co-owner and

its from downsizing to a smaller home in Burns Park, he purchased the rights to open four Big Blue Swim School franchises in February 2020. He leased space in Cranbrook Village, and along with two silent partners (the son and daughter of a close friend) and a small business loan, scheduled the grand opening for July 2022.

Then, on the evening of February 8, a friend called to say that one of his buddies had seen a fire at the construction site. He drove down Eisenhower and saw a myriad of flashing lights and bright orange flames raging from the brand new Big Blue Swim sign.

"At that point I just took it all in, knowing full well there was absolutely nothing I could do except stay out of the firefighters' way and let them do their job," Avsharian says. "I even joked I'd give them a discount on swim lessons once I was up and running."

He plans to resume construction in the next couple of months and hopes to open by April 2023.

Avsharian finished the script for *Pulling the Goalie* in the spring of last year. Then, he says, he told himself, "if you don't film something, you're going to regret it forever." But he knew "zero" about making a film.

Through a business group he met veteran producer Bob Brown, who's worked with notables like Jeff Daniels, Jessica Lange, and Kathy Bates. To control the scope, the time, and the price tag, he pared his full-length feature script into a short film—then began learning filmmaking on the fly.

Most of the filming took place at the Cube. They turned an old, musty basement room into a classroom set, and for one sidesplitting love scene, put a bed directly on the ice.

"I loved working with Hiag," says Lani Call, who plays the female lead. "He's so passionate about this story and the purpose behind the film."

In addition to the social stigma surrounding infertility, Avsharian points out, treatments also come with a hefty price tag. IUI can cost \$2,500 a month, while in vitro fertilization can cost \$20,000 or more. Few insurance plans cover it.

"I talked to a woman in town who's been trying for years to have a child," Avsharian said. "Through tears she tells me, 'We can't afford those fancy fertility treatments.'" He's talked to numerous people with similar stories, and hopes the film can help.

"The key metric is number of views," he says. "My goal is one million views"—a figure he believes would "promote the conversation to make infertility treatments more accessible, which means more mandated health insurance coverage."

*Pulling the Goalie* premieres at the Michigan Theater on October 22 (see Events). Then he may try to get the film on a streaming platform, or upload it free to YouTube. He just wants people to see it.



LANI CALL AND MASON HEIDGER STAR IN A FILM SET IN THE WORLD OF BEER LEAGUE HOCKEY.



COURTESY HIAG AVSHARIAN

NOW THE FATHER OF TWO, AVSHARIAN'S INFERTILITY STRUGGLE IS OVER. HIS BUSINESS CHALLENGES ARE NOT.